

Massive quarry, mine planned in Robbins

Vacant land, large blocks with homes would be acquired

BY CASEY TONER

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A west suburban developer is looking to acquire massive swaths of land in Robbins and turn it into an industrial megaplex complete with a quarry, an underground mine, asphalt and concrete factories and a therapy horse ranch, according to an agreement village officials quietly approved this year.

If the plan comes to fruition, such a deal would radically alter the face of one of the Southland's poorest communities and give control of more than 320 acres — including its underground limestone — to Riverside-based ALM Resources for redevelopment. The plan calls for acquiring both vacant land and large blocks with homes on them.

"This is a takeover," resident Delean Fuller said.

Village officials have been tight-lipped. But according to documents the SouthtownStar obtained, the project would stretch from 135th Street north to the Calumet Sag Channel and from Pulaski Road east to Francisco Avenue. It would travel from Kedzie Avenue east to the village limits at Sacramento Avenue, and south down Cooper's Grove Boulevard. The far southeast corner of the village, where it runs into Interstate 294, also is part of the deal.

To make the project happen, the village needs to acquire land that includes roughly 100 single-family homes. The developer wants to acquire the land through a quick-take process, which needs approval from Illinois lawmakers, who could consider it during the General Assembly's upcoming veto session.

State Rep. Robert Rita (D-Blue Island), who represents most of Robbins, said the project would be a "good opportunity for the village." He said he may introduce quick-take legislation during the veto session but won't call it for a vote.



The Greater Christian Unity Church, which would be condemned to make way for the quarry, holds weekly meetings for residents on the status of the proposed Robbins quarry. | GARY MIDDENDORF/FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA

State Rep. Will Davis (D-Hazel Crest), who also represents Robbins, said Mayor Tyrone Ward and village officials need to meet with residents to clarify the situation but would not rule out sponsoring the legislation.

The plan calls for the excavation of a 61-acre quarry on the village's east side and a 169-acre underground mine tunneling under homes through the village's north end. In turn, Robbins would get an annual cut of revenue from mining operations.

The developer's managing partner, whose other company developed the village's master plan, said the development would generate much needed jobs and revenue.

Robbins residents who live in the plan's footprint, however, aren't so keen on the deal. Many, such as Fuller, claimed village officials left them out of the planning process and are giving away the historically black community for a fraction of their land's value.

"Our people settled here in the 1800s. You have families that have been here three, four, five generations," Fuller said. "These people are underhandedly buying up our properties, and we had no clue as to what was going on."

Residents gathered Thursday night at Greater Unity Baptist

Church in Robbins to discuss an action plan.

Davis attended the meeting and bore the brunt of the crowd's anger. After the meeting, Davis said Robbins Trustee Shantiel Simon approached him about the project, and he later met with the developers concerning the quick-take option.

ALM Resources donated \$2,000 to Simon in March, according to campaign records from the Illinois Department of Elections. Simon could not be reached for comment.

In one of her final acts as mayor, Irene Brodie signed off on the redevelopment agreement with ALM Resources in May, and the board unanimously approved it, records show.

The project would span three phases. The first calls for development of a 61-acre quarry, an adjacent processing facility, an asphalt factory and a ready-mix plant. The second calls for a 100-acre industrial site including a truck terminal, multi-family housing, a therapy horse farm and an intermodal center. The third calls for the creation of a 169-acre underground mine, which would necessitate the village acquiring mineral rights from the properties on the surface.

Under the plan, Robbins would receive a portion of revenue based

on quarry sales.

Robbins resident Charles White, 70, lives on property atop where the mine would be built. He moved into the home he built with his father when he was a teenager in the 1950s. Now, White is worried about what would happen to his house with a limestone mine beneath it. He and other neighbors are being told they have to sell the mineral rights under their homes, he said.

"Eventually, my house is going to fall into a hole," White said. "This (neighborhood) is going to be nothing but a canyon."

White and his sister, Gloria Scott, said they feel the village is selling out many residents who'll have to leave their homes to make way for the quarry. White said the residents haven't been told how much they will be paid for mineral rights, but they've been assured the blasting — about 600 feet under them — won't damage foundations or basements.

Village attorney Michael Synowiecki, who did not respond to multiple messages Friday, sent letters in August informing property owners the village was looking to acquire their land.

While the company would receive taxpayer money from a special taxing district designed to

restore blighted property, ALM Resources would bear the cost of building the project. ALM Resources managing member, Jim Louthen, is also the president of a company that previously developed the village's master plan — Town Builder Studios.

Louthen said in a brief phone interview the redevelopment was a result of a "solid public-private partnership with the community" and includes repairing Robbins' sewer system.

"This development is anchored by an industrial component but it also includes other much-needed infrastructure for the village including affordable housing, commercial development, a huge ranch and parks for the park district," Louthen said.

Asked for the number of single-family homes that would be acquired by quick-take, Louthen said he was on airplane and the flight attendant was telling him to get off the phone. Then he hung up.

The mayor did not return multiple calls Friday but released the following statement: "We are obtaining more documents and information in hopes of negotiation and/or amending and/or amending our existing agreement to one that would be more favorable to our residents," Ward wrote. "We will be rendering our decision based on those outcome of those deliberations, which will be soon."

At least one Robbins trustee isn't happy with the plan. Lynn Johnson said the prior administration passed the redevelopment agreement, "without having a lot of information. I think it's wrong because we don't know the facts."

Johnson's brother, David, lives in the footprint of the plan at 13805 Albany Ave., near the village's Metra station. The 70-year-old man said he plans to fight the deal until he gets kicked out of his home, if that's what is needed.

"When you cut a contract giving away one third of the town for no money is kinda ridiculous when the people you are giving it to are going to mine about a billion dollars worth of limestone," Johnson said. "This is too lopsided a deal."

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